

# LAW AND SOCIAL IN ISRAEL: AN IMPLICATION FOR THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

CHUKWUEZI ELIZABETH PhD  
West African Theological Seminary Owerri  
[drelizabethchukwuezi@yahoo.com](mailto:drelizabethchukwuezi@yahoo.com)

and

AGOHA EMMANUEL C. PhD  
Department of Religion and Cultural Studies  
Alvan Ikoku Federal College Of Education , Owerri  
[emmagoha7@gmail.com](mailto:emmagoha7@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

*Law is an orderly system of rules and regulations by which a nation is being governed. Every nation needs rules and regulation with enforcing penalties for civilized life. These laws regulate how they should behave or conduct the affairs of life and the society. It is a common phenomenon for societies to view part of their law as having been divinely revealed to the spiritual heads such as the king, prophets and priests. Ancient Israel was virtually a theocracy and her laws were synonymous with morality. It is an expression of what God requires of people which rests on the eternal moral principles of God himself. Besides, their law viewed all human life as especially valuable, because people are created in God's image. It avoided mutilation and other savage punishments instead; it was a mandate for equality. These laws were all encompassing and well embracing as it covered every aspect of their lives and society. This study will adopt the social-critical approach. The practice of this system of law brings social order, political stability and economic boom. This paper seeks to provide a sound biblical understanding of law in biblical perspective, to explain its character, to illustrate how it ensured social order in Israel and to show its implication for the Nigerian society.*

**Keywords:** Law, Social Order, Israel, Nigeria, Society

## Introduction

Etymologically, the word law is a Hebrew connotation “Yarah” which means “to direct, teach or instruct”. This reveals that this is prescriptive and so demands conformity. Hence, the basic meaning is centered on “instruction”. This is more of a legal kind of instruction. The law could mean either the command given to Moses or the whole Pentateuch which contain divine stipulations that gave meaning to the laws.

Law in Israel was not just mere rules and regulations but are pure revelations of God's will and nature, developed out of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

According to Mendenhall (1954, p.26-27) “the law expresses how the character and life in the covenant should be”. This is because the law expresses how God gave Himself to the people of Israel in covenant relationship. God being the king of Israel used the law to reveal the kind of Philosophical bases on which the nation should be built. The law was given without condition and obedience was required from all in covenant relationship with God. Obedience to the law is a clear proof of obedience to God. The law revealed two basic packages, the policy and procedure. The policy reveals the foundational bases of the community that expresses the legal aspect of how life should be lived in the community. Israel communal life and existence depended on the fact that God not only chose them but bounded himself with faithful promises to sustain them.

Desmond Alexander and David Baker (2003, p.499) upholding the same view observed that “it is the personal association between God and law that gave the law its distinctive flavour in the Old Testament”.<sup>2</sup> God's character and identification embedded in the law showed that learning the law was to learn about God. Mann, Sailhamer and Greengus (1971, p. 86-91) concurring to this fact affirmed that the law was viewed as God's speaking to each generation as well as highlighting the future consequence of different response to his word<sup>3</sup>. This was the reason why Israelites were commanded to teach the law to their children, write it on the door post, talk about it while walking on the road as well as when they are eating.

Eichrodt (1961, p.75) in full agreement posits that “not only the cultic law but the secular law derives its validity from being a direct command from God”.<sup>4</sup>

The procedures embedded in the law simply explain ways by which the policy will be administered. Interestingly, the law reveals to the people the way they ought to conduct themselves in order to meet God's particular design for life in the community. Jacob Edmond (1958, p.272-73) in full support postulated that “the giving of the law at the period of covenant first revealed the power and person of God before it served as an instruction”<sup>5</sup>. This is the more reason why salvation cannot be gotten by the keeping of the law because the people of Israel before the Sinaitic covenant had been delivered from Egypt. Hence, grace was made known in the giving of the law and in the covenant relationship. Moreover, faithful obedience was to be the outcome of the experience of God's deliverance. In other words, the faithful promises of God were to be enjoyed based on obedience response from the people. It was based on this fact that Crusemann, F C (1996, p.2) observed that “the law identifies the unity of the law and the gospel and thus the unity of divine word and will”<sup>6</sup>. The law expressed God's holy will for the life and behaviour of mankind. In the Community Ancient Israel was virtually a theocracy in which divine law was almost synonymous with morality. In all Israel societies and communities their law consists of practices and customs which have come to have the force of law: that is ways of life and belief which could be enforced by at least a form of litigation. These punishments stipulated in the Old Testament laws showed a restraint of gross brutality.

Furthermore, the law was given to enable the people manifest the character of God as

well as shape communal life so that the people can serve as a vehicle of God's presence in the world. Wright C. F. H. (1992, p.226-29) in full support avers that “the law as a whole has a missionary purpose based on Israel's calling to be a priesthood and their role as a paradigm to other nations”<sup>7</sup>. Hence, the law was given to show other nations how their societies should be administered, so that there would be orderliness in every sphere of life. The prime place of the law in the community of Israel was to favour the people and not meant for the privileged few. The law was a kind of divine apologia inaugurated to meet their concern for justice and social order. Norman Whybray (1995, p.107), upholding the view that the law was not meant to favour the privileged few postulates that “the kings were not above the law rather they were also expected to obey and keep the law”<sup>8</sup>. They were also judged by the same law. Dt. 17:18-20

### **Historical Overview of the Laws in Israel**

The first intimate discussion between God and man after the commissioning of man on earth was more of instructions on how to pattern their life in accordance with the revealed will of God. The law was given to help man to be responsible to his maker. Therefore, it put them under an obligation to conform to His will; hence they were given a law to live by (Gen. 2:16-17). The law was given to both examine (Gen. 3:11) and condemn them (Gen. 3:17).

Patrick (1985, p.253) aptly put it thus: “the law was the original formulation of the will of God as well as a witness to an unwritten law about God's justice and righteousness”<sup>9</sup>. The law was given as a test of the people's obedience and faith. The promulgation at Sinai was given based on God's past gifts to his people who placed a demand and an obligation on Israel's present and future obedience. The law represented God's power as well as his willingness to continue to shower his blessing and benefits on them. These promulgations were given to enable Israel to remember God's delivering power in connection to Egypt. In other words, the law was a requirement to be holy.

. Dyrness (2007, p132) aptly puts it that “all the commandments are to express in concrete terms the character of the relationship of God with his people”<sup>11</sup> this was why there was no provision for the enforcement of the law because by nature, the relationship demands free personal responses. According to Harrison, (1960, p.318), the laws were decisions taken in concrete dilemma. Some of the laws existed before a national state existed, as rules governing certain aspects of life and behaviour in a tribal setting or society. They were promulgation and prohibitions stipulated in the interest of community solidarity and orderliness. These laws were given as a timeless entity to govern the community of Israel and it was binding, on all members of their society as far as it could be observed. In fact, the law was the one stable factor and the central Pillar of Jewish life. Hence, the law helped to mould the lifestyle of the people and served as a tool for social order

The administration of these laws was carried out by different persons from time to time depending on the political system and condition under which the nation lived. Moses was the instrumentality God used to administer the law and saw to the smooth running of the community of Israel. As time went on, food laws and the laws governing the clean and

unclean was given to preserve public health, promote holiness and protect the environment. The priests were used as the authority and when the need arose, they exact penalties for breach of the law. The priests were primarily entrusted with the enforcement as well as the teaching of the law to enable the people understand divine requirement. The priests functioned in the Mosaic era, prophetic and post exilic period.

In later development, priests, judges and heads of clans functioned hand in hand. At the time of sacrifices and issues of purity, the priests were in-charge. In matters governing the prohibition of theft, murder, sexual transgression which was given to save guards the disruption of tribal and family harmony. Heads of families and clans were used to handle these cases so that order will be maintained. The family heads or clan heads ensured that the law functioned easily in the context of everyday life since they were entrusted with the responsibility of administering disputes among the people. At a particular time it was judges that were instituted as the major judicial authority handling issues in the land. In this office, the judges functioned more as defender of right instead of punisher of crime. They were simply arbiters administering justice. The institution of the judges brought an end to the judicial activities of the family heads.

In the period of monarchy, judicial authorities were the kings walking hand in hand with the heads of clan. These “elders” as they were called will always sit at the city gate to administer justice to the people as well as exact penalties any time there is a breach of the law. The history of Israel revealed that Israel perceived the law as a datum of life, given as a timeless entity to serve as the central pillar of their life community orderliness and walk with God. Even under the Persian rule, the people were still observing their laws. This was why Daniel in Babylon refused to eat the king's meat, because he was careful not to break their dietary laws. Daniel refusal to bow down to the “golden image” was simply obedience to one of the stipulations in the Ten Commandments. Moreover, Ezra and Nehemiah under the Persian rule were still known to be skilled in the law of their God (Ezr. 7:6). The prime place of the law in Jewish heart aided the recognition of these laws by the Persian kings (Ezr 7:14, 25-26). The law formed the foundation of the Israel community and the bedrock of that society, by so doing, the law enforced respect and social order.

### **The Character of the Law in Israel**

The essential qualities of the law are the fact that it is comprehensive in scope; it has personal appeal, filled with unconditional forces as well as universal application. Comprehensively, it encompasses all aspects of life as well as all matters that have to do with the state, in the cult, business and the home. In fact there is no aspect or dimension of life that the law did not give attention to just as it applied to the state, in the same way, it handled matters having to do with worship. According to Eichrodt (1961, p.92), there grow up an understanding of the total ordering of the people's life as a revelation of the saving will of God”. Each stipulation was basically principles to guide life in the community thereby providing an experience Eichrodt explained as “healthy feeling for justice”. (Eichrodt 1961,p77). The law served as a compass or road map stipulating divine direction for life and communal orderliness. For Alexander

and Baker (2003, p.512), the law was comprehensive in that it combined worship and ethics thereby bringing together the God ward and the human ward dimension of life.

The law also had personal appeal. The aim and motive of the law was to produce on the recipients a responsive heart so that moral compliance will be a general experience of everyone in covenantal relationship. The law aided the people to develop proper perspective as well as personal commitment to God, to one another and to the society at large. The law provided an inner principle which controlled and determined their conduct like a governing authority. Universally the law had an unconditional force with its foundation based on the holiness of God and presupposed perfection from the people (Lev 11; 44). This was the more reason why anyone who did not comply to the words of the law was cursed (Deut 27; 26). The law was universal in its application because it applied to all Israel, transcending their national boundaries, extended to visitors and strangers. Even their enemies were considered by the law (Ex 23; 4-5, Prov 25; 21).

### **The Law and Social Order**

The law in Israel as a nation ordered life in the community and helped to bring direction as to the order of proper way of worshiping God by stipulating man's duty to God, regarding Gods being, His worship and His name. The second aspect of the law aided proper administration of the society by producing instructions concerning man's duty to man, regarding honoring parents, not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness and not coveting.

The law provided specific instructions about daily social relationships. It concerned administration of justice, rights of property, care of the poor, training of children, punishment of criminals etc. Some of the laws also handled issues of personal interrelationship between father and children, masters and servants, husband and wife, between the community and widow, orphans, strangers and the poor. The law helped Israel as a nation to achieve balance in the face of the flux that often resulted from the inter-relationship of people and groups with competing interest. Malina, (1982, p.229-42), in full support observed that when societies fail to achieve balance they may instead weaken and in most cases ultimately implode” The cult and piety grew together out of the covenant relationship defined in the law. The law aided the moral life of people in Israel.

Mckenzie (1976, p.239) concurring to this fact affirmed that "the individual man was moral only in society and through society, in a sense, he had no moral responsibility, moral responsibility fell upon the whole society which created the conditions in which the individual persons lived.”The command to honour parents depicts human authority and this reveals the father hood of God (Ex. 4:4:22). The family is the arena to nurture respect for authority. According to Kidner (1972, p.12), the family represents a miniature of the nation. Once order exists in the family, it will be reflected in the nation as well<sup>28</sup>. Dyrness (2007, p.131 identifying with this point affirms that “the loyalty that is due to parents offers the people the opportunity to learn loyalty". The command not to kill was a social insurance against destruction of life. The law modeled people's attitude towards their neighbours and

ensured freedom from animosity of every form.

The economic laws of freeing slaves, sabbatical year; jubilee, levirate marriage and no interest of loans were aimed at regular redistribution of wealth and land, to prevent chronic poverty. In so doing the law provided practical application of principle of social well-being to the acquisition and use of wealth. The command for child training, faithfulness in marriage and the prohibition of adultery protects the family by the single standard of purity, educational preparation for marriage, home making and parenthood.

Agricultural laws gave room for economic justice for the farmer in legislation, provided a sure way for providing for the orphans, widows and the poor in the society as well as attracting blessings on the farmer who acknowledged God as the source of his agricultural prowess. The command against stealing protects the individual and the society from the social, economic and moral waste. When property is protected, the basic responsibility of dominion is protected. The law against kidnapping and child care provided protection, spiritual nurture and wholesome recreation for every child. Meanwhile, the law governing servants and slaves safeguards all workers against harmful conditions of labour and occupational injury. The law pertaining to women also safeguards their welfare and that of the family and community.

The law provides provisions for punishment, Hence, providing principle of redemption, to treatment of offenders; reform of penal and correctional methods and institutions as well as criminal court procedure. The command against bearing false witness has primary reference to the law court. It also seeks to prevent the intended damage to an individual reputation. The law also provides strict penalties for such offences, thereby bringing order in the society. The law illustrates what it means to apply divine will to the social order, it points to the kind of world which would be possible if the law were seriously applied to the problems of the society. And it provided order in the Israel societies and community.

According to Carter (1993, p.42), the Holiness Code reveals God command for ritual purity with the prescription for ethnic purity". This simply reflects social significance and social boundaries (Lev. 20:22-26) Douglas (1966: 57-60) in her idealistic adumbrations posits that "food laws emanates from a comprehensive concept of order and purity"<sup>30</sup>. This is very vital because material realities are of great importance in the development of social structures, cultural practices and ideologies. Smith, Wallis and Causes, (1980, pp 102) are of the view that the law in prophetic era was used to emphasize social justice and material implications of oppression"<sup>31</sup>. According to Mendenhall (1962, p.87),"" the concept of law spring from the covenanted community served as a basis for Israel unity setting the pace for the social context"<sup>32</sup>. The law is an eye opener, helping a man to see his own corruption and inadequacies, his need of pardon and gracious reinstatement, Hence, his hopeless condition void of divine deliverance which comes only from God. Thus, the law carries out a preparatory role of correction as well as teaching the way out which is nothing but a total return to the divine reality. The law is holy, just and good and it is primarily channeled to

those who are still battling to establish their own righteousness indeed as the law is fundamentally an expression of the perfect character and will of God, it would be impossible for it to ever cease to be the ideal of human morality and social order. The bible regards the law of any community as binding on the people as well as strangers and visitors. And so were the biblical laws binding on the people of that time within the jurisdiction of Israel communities. The validity of the law in one way depended on the character of the legislators but rather upon the providential ordering of Israel society, in which all authority is ultimately of God.

### **Implications of the Law for the Nigeria situation.**

For the past three decades in Nigeria, crime, lawlessness, in discipline, nepotism, bribery and corruption have been the order of the day in small towns, in big cities, in suburb areas, in schools, among our youths, workers, politicians, business men and in all endeavours and works of life. This is so because the God factor behind the law is lost. God is not seen or perceived as giver of the law. Nigerians do not have God in the center of their law as Israel did. In Israel the law was central to the institution of the Sinaitic covenant and so to the relationship between God and His people. Nigerians do not observe law as a revelation of God's character or His will for the life of the people God has called into relationship with himself.

God is not known to be the one that established the Nigerian government. To this end, the predominant factor governing the solid life of the Nigerian societies is what Eichrodt (1961, p.75) terms "popular morality": moral and ethical norms that arise from the experience of a community, which are passed from one generation to the next to ensure the survival and well-being of their society. This suggests that overcrowded living conditions, poverty and inadequate education are not the only factors that produce lawlessness. The Old Testament contains laws similar to those found in the Nigerian law codes, but they are distinctive in that they arise not from a concept of natural justice or community survival but from the revealed will of God.

The distinctiveness found in the law was what enabled them to fulfill their mission in the world, cultivate orderliness in their society and aided the promotion of love and care for life and property. Hence, the Old Testament law is designed to be an ethical principle that views actions and behaviors in the light of God's character. The Old Testament law is concerned with right living in the real world. Meaning that relationship with God has implication for life in society. For Nigerians to experience right living in the real world, they must borrow leave from Israel and give God a primary place in their life and law. The disrespect for law in Nigeria, in other words, has more to do with internal attitudes than with external environments. This does not mean that Nigerians should not endeavour to ensure the amelioration of sordid social conditions. It simply upholds that the sum solution to the problem of rebellion and lawlessness is deeply rooted in the heart. Moreover, it is only the heart that is

yielded to God that can positively respond.

Even though Nigerian modern society stamps the Ten Commandments as being completely outdated and old fashioned, the role of the Ten Commandments in enforcing order in the society can never be overemphasized. According to Youngblood (1997, p. 70), who was concurring to the benefits of the Law of Israel in social transformation narrated the fact that the Oklahoma state and Parole Board recently ruled that prisoners seeking to be released from the state prison in McAlestar must make a sincere effort to learn the Ten Commandments by heart. This is so because they understood the social implication of the law of Israel. In the same vein, social order, character consistent with the life of God, discipline and love for life and property can be a reality in the Nigerian situation if the God factor is restored in the Nigerian Law. Nevertheless, if the law is applied and operated the way it was done in Israel, Nigeria will experience serenity and orderliness that pass all understanding. It is only then that the Nigerian society will know peace and experience a crime free society.

## CONCLUSION

Moreover, the law in Israel provided a means of fellowship through its obedience. It reflected the inner commitment of the people of God, that was why it demanded a more universal and internal frame of reference. The law made provisions for the slaves, strangers, free born, widows, orphans and fair human treatment was differently administered to each group. Economic and political issues were given primary attention. The benefits and high level of social order the law provided made the people see the law as the focal point of their life and obedience to it as a means of acquiring blessing from God. This made the people uphold the law as a package that must be established and preserved in a deeper way.

## Reference List

- Alexander D. and David B (2005)**, *Dictionary of the old testament pentateuch* Downers Groove, Illinois. Inter Varsity Press.
- Baker, K. L and Kohlenberger J. R (1994)**, *The expositor's bible commentary*. Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan.
- Brueggemann. R (1997)**, *Old testament theology*. Minneapolis: fortress
- Crusemann D (1996)**, *The torah: theology and social history of old testament law*. Minneapolis: Forturess.
- Carter, C. E (1993)**, *Purity and distinction in Leviticus*. SBL Nov. Washington D. C. <http://www.Biblicalresonvce.com/paper/Leviticus>
- Dyrness W (2007)**, *Themes in old testament theology*. Downers Groove, Illinois IVP Academic

- Douglas M (1966)** *Purity and danger: An analysis of the concept of pollution and Taboo.* London, Routledge Kegan Paul
- Eichrodt, W (1961)**, *Theology of the old testament vol 2 Philadelphia.* West Minister.
- Greengus, S (1971)**, *Law. Advanced Bible Dicationary.* NDCB, Greenwood S. C Attic
- Harrison, E. F (1960)**, *Baker's dictionary of theology.* Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Book House.
- Jacob E (1958)**, *Theology of the old testament.* New York: Harper and Row.
- Kidner D (1972)**, *Hard saying: the challenge of old testament morals.* London: Inter vacity
- Kenneth B (1995)** *The NIV study bible* Grand Rapids, Michigan. Zondervan Pub House.
- Lohfink. N (1994)**, *Theology of the pentateuch* Edinbigh T & T Clark
- Lois Fuller (2008)** *The pentateuch. Plateau State, Nigeria: Acts*
- Mendenhall, G.E (1962)**, "Covenant forms in Israelite tradition" *Biblical archaeology* 17, No 3, 50–76.
- Mendenhall, G. E (1954)** "Ancient oriental and biblical law" *biblical archaeologist* 17. No. 2. 26-46.
- Malina, B (1982)**, *The social sciences and biblical interpretation* 229-42) London: Pickering
- Mckenzie, J. L (1976)**, *A theology of the old testament.* New York: Doubleday.
- Mann, T. W (1988)**, *The book of the law* Atlanta; John knox.
- Philip A (1970)** *Ancient Israel's criminal law. A new approach to the decalogue.* New York Schocken and Oxford; Blackwell.
- Patrick, D (1985.)** *Old testament law.* Atlanta John Knox.
- Philip, A C J (1970)**, *Ancient Israels criminal law* Oxford. Oxford University Press
- Robertson Smith (1975)**, *Sociological study of religion.* Chicago, University Press. Chicago (56-57)
- Sailhamer, J. H (1992)**, *The pentateuch as narrative,* Grand Rapid, Michigan; Zondervan.
- Wright C. J. H (1992)**, *The ethical authority of the old testament.* Downers Groove Inter Vacity Press.
- Wright, G. E (1950)**, *The old testament against its environment.* London. SCM.
- Whybray N. R (1995)**, *Introduction to the pentateuch.* Grands Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmas Pub. Coy...
- Weinfeld, M (1991)**, *Deuteronomy 1-11 A B 5,* New York: Doubleday.